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ABSTRACT

When the "theory of incompatibilities" was first elaborated more than 30 years ago, it identified five characteristics that schools needed to address to improve migrant education, but it failed to recognize the moral and cognitive strengths elicited in many youth by the harsh migrant experience. The theory posited five interdependent characteristics that impact migrant education--poverty, culture, language, mobility, and societal perceptions--and suggested that education processes should be made compatible with the characteristics of the population rather than requiring the population to adapt to the school. A curriculum of identification, affirmation, and validation draws on students' cultural background and experiences, acknowledges their value, and provides a bridge between home and school. Among the theory's five characteristics, the one most vital to a breakthrough in migrant education is societal perceptions, which explains how schools and migrant families view each other and how this interactive relationship affects the success of migrant children. The future paradigm for migrant education must be needs-responsive but must also focus aggressively on the assets of migrant children, families, and communities. The experiences of migrant families teach their children valuable lessons about family, work, and faith. Focusing on these areas can help migrant children break through and succeed in school. (SV)

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CHAPTER 17

Breaking Through in Migrant Education[1]

BY BLANDINA CÁRDENAS

More than thirty years ago, in the "Theory of Incompatibilities," José Cárdenas and I described the persistent failure of schools to educate migrant students. Today, the children who harvest the food we eat still experience a harsh life, and schools continue to ignore the importance of migrant children's experiences.

José and I grew up in stable middle-class homes in segregated southern Texas. Our neighborhoods and schools would lose more than half their populations in early spring as families boarded the big trucks that took them to pick cherries, apricots, *lechuga* (lettuce), and *betabel* (sugar beets). We listened as our friends came home with stories of travel and adventure in exotic places like Wisconsin, Michigan, and Idaho, and we believed. They returned to our classrooms from late September to early November and seemed stronger, more savvy, quicker to problem-solve, and weary and wise in ways

[1]In 2002, Francisco Jiménez received the Tomás Rivera Children's Book Award from Southwest Texas University for his autobiographical works *The Circuit* and *Breaking Through*. I use the *breaking through* metaphor with profound respect and appreciation for the insight and inspiration gained from his moving stories of individual and family strength in the face of grinding poverty, discrimination, and impermanence.

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we recognized but did not understand. A few struggled to catch up with lost instruction and quickly became competitive; many more barely got by or tuned out altogether. On a deep, partly unconscious level, we believed our migrant friends had assets and were every bit as capable of excelling in academics as we were.

Why the Theory of Incompatibilities?

In developing the Theory of Incompatibilities, we relied on the largely quantitative social science research methods supported by the education research funding of the late 1960s and early 1970s. We looked at systems and characteristics. What escaped our analysis was a sufficient appreciation for the harshness of migrant life and the moral and cognitive strength it elicits—a strength schools either do not recognize or are unable to tap.

Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, federal funding for migrant education has flowed from the Title I Migrant Education Program, Head Start Indian and migrant allocations, the College Assistance Migrant Program, and other initiatives. Years of experimentation and advances in technology finally have resulted in an education record transfer system, although incompatibilities in requirements among states remain a barrier. Success stories among former migrant students are numerous and include individuals who have served in Congress, state legislatures, law, medicine, the military, and positions of leadership in higher education and public schools.

But the glass is still at least half empty when it comes to migrant education. Too many success stories occur in spite of the education system, not because of it. Schools have not made sufficient strides in adapting processes and instruction to the needs and assets of children whose life chances are shaped by the harshness of fieldwork. Exposure to agricultural chemicals still menaces families in the field. The effects of irregular immigration and migrant labor are either ignored or attacked. An education system structured historically to serve an agriculture-based economy now is unable to restructure its beliefs and processes to serve the children of workers whose backbreaking labor puts food on our tables. Schools must find ways to connect with the creative and productive potential that migrant children demonstrate simply by surviving.

The Theory of Incompatibilities posited that five interdependent characteristics have an impact on migrant education: poverty, culture, language, mobility, and societal perceptions. Schools must consider each characteristic in adapting education services and programs to the needs and the strengths of Mexican American migrant children. Education processes—from governance, to curriculum, to pupil services, to evaluation—should be made compatible with the characteristics of the population rather than requiring the population to adapt to the school. The effects of these conditions likely have become more acute in a population battered by economic, immigration, familial, and cultural forces more demanding than those of a third of a century ago. Implementation of the Theory of Incompatibilities today requires particular attention to the binational nature of mobility, psychological pressures of immigration and irregular status, cultural and structural changes in families, health needs attendant to working in toxic environments, and exacerbated effects of living in extreme poverty in a high-cost economy.

Curriculum of Identification, Affirmation, and Validation

Francisco Jiménez describes a moment of deep learning and insightful teaching that says everything the Theory of Incompatibilities intended to communicate. As a high school sophomore, Jiménez struggled with English language, grammar, composition, and comprehension. Charged to write an autobiographical composition, he did not want his teacher Miss Bell to know he had entered the country illegally. Instead, he wrote about the time his baby brother had nearly died in a migrant labor tent city. His paper was returned with a sea of red marks and a note to see Miss Bell after class.

> "Is what you wrote a true story?" Miss Bell asked.
>
> "Yes," I answered, feeling anxious.
>
> "I thought so," she said smiling. "It's a very moving story. Did your brother die?"
>
> "Oh no!" I exclaimed. "He almost did, but God saved him."
>
> "Now, let's look at your paper."
>
> "Your writing shows promise. If you're able to overcome the difficulties like the one you describe in your paper and you continue working as hard as you have, you're going to

> succeed." She gave me back the paper and added, "Here take it home, make corrections, and turn it in to me tomorrow after class."

When he submitted the revised paper, Miss Bell handed him a book and asked, "Have you read *The Grapes of Wrath?*"

"No," I said, wondering what the word wrath meant.

Grabbing every moment to read the book and continuously looking up unfamiliar words, Jiménez absorbed the Joads even into his dreams:

> I kept struggling with the reading, but I could not put it down. I finally understood what Miss Bell meant when she told me to read for enjoyment. I could relate to what I was reading. The Joad family was poor and traveled from place to place in an old jalopy, looking for work. They picked grapes and cotton and lived in labor camps similar to the ones we lived in like Tent City in Santa Maria. Ma Joad was like Mama and Pa Joad was a lot like Papa. Even though they were not Mexican and spoke only English, they had many of the same experiences as my family. I felt for them. I got angry with the growers who mistreated them and was glad when Tom Joad protested and fought for their rights. He reminded me of my friend Don Gabriel, the *bracero* who stood up to Diaz, the labor contractor, who tried to force Don Gabriel to pull a plow like an ox.[2]

Applying the intuition many good teachers possess, Miss Bell created compatibility between the curriculum and her student. She offered a curriculum of identification, affirmation, and validation. Moreover, she focused on Jiménez's assets rather than his deficits and gave him a lifeline to her high expectations and standards. While issues of culture and language were not in her imagination, she responded to the characteristics of poverty and mobility. Most important, she responded to the characteristic of societal perceptions. She

[2]Francisco Jiménez, *Breaking Through* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 98-102.

let Jiménez know he belonged in her demanding class and recognized he was transforming the adversity in his life into something valuable.

My own Mexican American migrant students taught me about the curriculum of identification, affirmation, and validation, and that changing the curriculum is not enough. I entered the dusty, hot barrack that was the site of my first teaching assignment in mid-April 1967. My third graders were migrants (because the other third-grade teacher did not like migrants), African Americans (because the other third-grade teacher did not like African Americans), and the Padilla boys (because the other third-grade teacher had taught their fathers and did not want to teach any more Padillas). Almost all the African American students were migrants and spoke Spanish. The previous teacher had left me a class as chaotic as any scene Hollywood might devise.

Mostly male, my students' ages spanned 10 years, with the gifted Padilla boys slightly underage for their grade. I had never had an education course and never heard the terms *bilingual education* or *multicultural education*. The principal handed me the overhead projector, purchased recently with Title I funds, and told me not to worry because the class would soon thin out as the migrants left. Unable to control the students, I resorted to bribery. I brought a cake to class and promised the students a party if they behaved. Everyone but the Padilla boys saved the cake to take home to their mothers. The next day, I took two cakes, one for the students to eat in class and one to be divided up for their mothers. As my students left, I called one of them *mijo*, the endearing version of *mi hijo*, or my son. Laughing and teasing, the students asked me if the boy really was my son. When I explained they all were my sons, of sorts, they all wanted me to call them *mijo*. I agreed.

Every day, I baked two cakes. Slowly, my classroom became a joyous place. Absences were nonexistent. One of my favorite stories was Benito Juárez, Mexico's only Indigenous president. While working in the fields and protecting his sheep from wolves, he learned lessons that served him well in defeating the French and saving Mexico's democracy. I went to the storeroom and found some old third-grade readers that described Juárez's life. With too few books, I grouped my students and had them read along as I read to them. My students were spellbound. After a raucous discussion of their own

experiences—including some of dubious veracity involving fields, mountains, sheep, and wolves—I assigned each student to read the book to their parents and report on what more they had learned about Benito Juárez. Every day for the next week, the students came back with their families' stories about Juárez. I did not know it then, but I had created the optimal environment for oral English language development, a pressing need among most of my students.

When the first student started talking about leaving to go to "the works," I felt I had to do something to keep him in school. I urged his family to keep him in school until after the exam. It worked. For the next few weeks, I spent my afternoons traipsing through the barrio and talking with every migrant head of household. Unaware of how a delayed departure could affect a family's income, I made a convincing case for the importance of education. Perhaps it was that I was 22 years old, that my Spanish was formal and respectful, or that my cakes had preceded me, but all but one student remained through the end of the term.

From these third-grade students and their families, I gained the essential understandings that have shaped my work in education and my advocacy for children. The cake scenario provided insight into the powerful role culture plays in motivating all learners. I realized that the most important role for these Mexican American students was to be a family member and that these close family ties could be a motivational and teaching tool. I have used the curriculum of identification, affirmation, and validation in all my teaching regardless of the students' education levels or cultural, ethnic, or racial backgrounds.

A growing number of former migrants are writing about their experiences, providing a deeper understanding of migrant children's complex lives and the impact of immigration, impermanency, language isolation, and hard labor on education.[3] These voices reflect the complexity of challenges, needs, and strengths of migrant families. Going forward, the actual stories of migrants must be at the center of

[3]Tomás Rivera reflects the experiences of long-term, U.S.-citizen, South Texas families who leave a stable community yearly to labor in agricultural fields. See Julián Olivares, ed., *Tomás Rivera: The Complete Works* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1991). Other autobiographical accounts include Jiménez, *Breaking Through*, and Josie Mendez-Negrete, *Las Hijas de Juan: Daughters Betrayed* (San Jose, CA: Chusma House, 2002).

advocacy and efforts to improve the education and life chances of migrant children and their families.

In a riveting first-person description of her childhood, Josie Mendez-Negrete describes the ache of leaving her close-knit, love-filled village in Mexico and her introduction to life in the land of opportunity:

> Not wanting to be *arrimados* ("spongers"), we stayed only long enough to make the money we needed to get to the next place. Mague and I were drafted into the fields. We lost our appetite for apples or any of the fruits we picked. Hated the scent of ripe fruit that clung to our clothes and turned our stomach. Felt as if we had been drenched in cheap perfume all day long.
>
> We didn't have drinking water, and we had to hold our bladder or go behind the bushes in view of the other workers. Never had breaks, forced to keep up an adult pace. Tin buckets we carried cut into our fingers and blistered them until we grew calluses on our palms.[4]

For Mendez-Negrete, immigration and impermanence meant isolation from her native community and her constantly changing world in the United States. The Theory of Incompatibilities focused attention on the need to bridge these experiences.

Building a Model of Advocacy

José Cárdenas and I often have been asked to single out the most important characteristic identified in the Theory of Incompatibilities. Bilingual educators expect us to cite language; migrant educators focus on mobility; compensatory education specialists point to poverty. We have declined to answer, rejecting the tendency of reformers to look for a silver bullet to produce quick results. In private, however, we have always agreed the prerequisite for a breakthrough is embedded in the characteristic we call *societal perceptions.*

The concept of societal perceptions emerged from consistent data indicating migrant parents are concerned about schools' attitudes

[4]Mendez-Negrete, *Las Hijas de Juan.*

toward them and their children. In 1969, parents reported feeling unwelcome in schools, being subjected to inferior teachers or classrooms after returning to their home schools, and multiple other slights. As we probed deeper, particularly with multigenerational migrant families, it became clear the parents' feelings had as much to do with their own experiences of rejection, discrimination, and failure in school as it did with their children's experiences. Societal perceptions explain how schools and families view each other and how this interactive relationship affects the success of migrant children. It is equally important to respond to schools' negative or dysfunctional perceptions of migrant students and their families as it is to address the negative or dysfunctional perceptions migrant students and their families have of schools.

The concept of societal perceptions initially proved difficult to manage. Defensive school personnel grasped that migrant parents might have negative attitudes toward education. Migrant education advocates focused on societal perceptions to affirm the existence of schools' discriminatory attitudes. Our position was that all the factors interrelate and that affirmative steps must be taken with regard to individual students, parents, and school personnel to develop positive perceptions and expectations.

In today's terms, we would say the paradigm on migrant families and their schooling must shift to achieve a significant breakthrough in education outcomes. Indeed, the Theory of Incompatibilities represented a weak paradigm shift, calling on educators to look not at deficits but at the disconnect between a school's expectations and what the students bring to school. We referred to needs and, more weakly, to strengths. The future paradigm for migrant education must be needs-responsive but also must focus aggressively on the assets of migrant children, families, and communities.

John Kretzmann and John McKnight have developed an assets-based community-development model that focuses on building community in urban settings; however, many of the strategies could work in migrant communities and school districts with new migrant or immigrant populations and limited resources. Kretzmann and McKnight call for mapping assets, building relationships, releasing individual and organizational capacities in communities, and capturing local institutional resources. Migrant communities, whether temporary or

permanent, have numerous assets to help schools better serve children. Migrant workers survive by using informal communication networks, kinship groups, and groups based on location of origin. People influence one another based upon a sophisticated assessment of the knowledge, skills, and wisdom relative to each challenge they confront. These assets, if recognized by schools, can serve as resources to benefit children.[5]

Luis Moll and James B. Greenberg demonstrate that an advanced classroom pedagogy requires a full understanding of how students' households express their own pedagogies. Social relations and means of production connect households to one another and help transmit "funds of knowledge" among participants. These transactions are extended zones of proximal development that can inform the mediation of instruction and transform classrooms into more advanced contexts for teaching and learning. A recent model engages parents to examine the funds of knowledge in their own household interactions with strategies that mediate their children's learning. This model goes beyond understanding that migrants *have* assets; the new paradigm understands that migrants *are* assets.[6]

In the spring of 1998, Jaime Chahin and I traveled to the central gulf coast of Florida to study tutoring programs.[7] Expecting that Title I children in that part of the country would be largely African American and White, we were surprised to see that most of the people in one small town were young Mexican men. By the end of the day, we were anxious to explore the area and figure out why all these Mexican men were there. We looked in the Catholic Church but found no one. Before long, we found a thriving Mexican food restaurant and

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[5]John P. Kretzmann and John L. McKnight, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets* (Chicago: Acta, 1993).

[6]Luis C. Moll and James B. Greenberg, "Creating Zones of Possibilities: Combining Social Context for Instruction," in *Vygotsky and Education: Instructional Implications and Applications of Sociohistorical Psychology*, ed. Luis C. Moll (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Belinda B. Flores, Mari Riojas-Cortez, and Ellen Clark, "Los Ninos Aprenden en Casa," in *Young Child* (forthcoming).

[7]Dr. Jaime Chahin subsequently developed the "Las Colonias" project to inform the public and policymakers about the needs and assets of the 500,000 mostly migrant families who live in unincorporated neighborhoods along the Mexico-U.S. border.

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a waitress in her late teens with an engaging personality and intelligence to spare.

She explained how her family made their way from the Mexican state of Oaxaca to the Florida gulf coast: "We walked," she said, in flawless English. "You walked?" we exclaimed. She enrolled in school at age six and recently graduated third in her class. She wanted desperately to attend college, but her immigration status denied her access to financial aid. During the discussion, we kept coming back to the remarkable story of how she *walked* with her father and sister from Oaxaca to the Florida gulf coast: "We walked up to Sonora and crossed through the desert and then walked across through Oklahoma and Arkansas."

We were awestruck by her story and assertion that many of the migrant workers in the town had taken the same trek. Invisible to the American consciousness, the stories of migrants are as courageous as the trail rides of pioneer settlers through desert and mountain, as hope-filled and dangerous as travel along the Underground Railroad. As with these earlier risk takers, the character and competence of migrants will sustain the United States for years to come.

In spite of the hardships, families engaged in migratory agricultural labor are not and need not become part of the permanent underclass. These families exemplify the values of family, work, and faith that society seeks. Whether recent immigrants, longer-term residents, legal or illegal, they *work!* They maintain intact, if imperfect, families. They keep at it, believing in this country. Cognitive competence always emerges from human beings teaching their children to negotiate family, work, and faith. Migrant children's experiences create formidable assets; we must build upon these assets to help them break through and succeed in school.

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